

New Tools: Blogs, Podcasts and Virtual Classrooms

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THE "Room 208" podcast may just have the youngest production staff in the history of broadcasting. Written, produced and performed entirely by the third and fourth graders in Bob Sprankle's class at the Wells Elementary School in Wells, Me., the podcast - an online radio show that can be downloaded to an MP3 player - began in April, has 171 subscribers for its weekly 20- to 30-minute shows and includes regular features like "Student News," "The Week in Sports" and "Word of the Week."



Reg Bennett

ON THE AIR - James Detullio with Zoe Onion and Emily Jones, right, recording the "Room 208" podcast in Wells, Me.

The May 27 show - a Memorial Day special - also included the students' responding to fan mail and "Bree's Animal Corner," a new weekly feature on which one student read descriptions of pets available for adoption at the Kennebunk Animal Center. That week, the school's public relations officer had come to interview the students about their podcast, and the children, thinking it would make good material, recorded the discussion and included it in their show.

They spoke confidently about scripts, intros, outros, editing, audio loops and background music and showed the officer how the [iPod](#) worked. The fourth graders, who will be in a different school next year, said they weren't worried about leaving Mr. Sprankle's class because they planned to return daily after school to continue their work.

"In building this product weekly, the kids are incredibly motivated to read, research, write, and they're telling me they can't wait to get to school," Mr. Sprankle said in an interview for the June 9 episode of "Connect Learning," another podcast (not affiliated with his school). "You can't just fake it with this show. You've got to own it."

Mr. Sprankle's experiment with podcasting in the classroom is just one of the interactive technologies some pioneering teachers are using in schools nationwide. Most work teachers have traditionally had students do online - searching [Google](#) instead of card catalogs, doing exercises online instead of in workbooks - has largely been in the mold of offline coursework.

These days, though, some teachers are building coursework around low-cost, software-based technologies. Some other programs include a blog shared among students in rural Maine and inner-city students in San Francisco to promote writing and cultural perspective; a voice over Internet protocol, or [VoIP](#), exchange among schools worldwide to practice foreign language and debate skills; and an urban planning course that's taught using a virtual world.

When Joel Arquillos, a social studies teacher at the Galileo Academy of Science and Technology in San Francisco, started his 11th-grade American history students blogging, he didn't know what to expect. Mr. Arquillos set up a group blog as a joint project with David Boardman's English class juniors and seniors from rural Winthrop High School in Maine for students to post assignments online,

comment on each other's work and expand their cultural awareness.

At first, the students needed to be prodded to post. But the blog took off when Mr. Arquillos had them write about their neighborhoods. A student who lives in the Tenderloin district in San Francisco described her feelings about the drug dealing and gang violence in the neighborhood. The Maine students posted that they had thought neighborhoods like the Tenderloin were urban legends.

Soon, the students started posting on their own to find out what their peers cross-country thought about various subjects (the structure of the new SAT's, good reasons to skip the prom, etc.), discussions that almost came to match the assigned writings in volume.

"I want to give these kids the tools to say, 'Hey, my voice is important in this world,' " Mr. Arquillos said after the yearlong experiment. "This blog helps me do that."

He was introduced to blogging as an educational tool by Patrick Delaney, Galileo's librarian. Mr. Delaney also helped Mindy Chiang, a Mandarin-language teacher at Galileo, set up a blog for her Chinese-American and Chinese immigrant students to write about and post their experiences for the benefit of fifth and sixth graders from schools in Elk Grove and Santa Barbara, Calif., who were studying Chinatowns.

Ms. Chiang and Mr. Delaney were delighted to discover that the quality of the writing for the blog surpassed her students' previous work. Moreover, when Ms. Chiang had them record audio versions of their essays in English and Mandarin using school iPod's, the students' accents were vastly improved.

"It's pretty clear that they were worried about being embarrassed," said Mr. Delaney, noting that the essays were available to the students' families and Web surfers in China. "Having an audience compelled these kids to step it up a notch."

Still, some educators are not completely sold on the value of interactivity. "If interactivity becomes the fundamental basis of the educational process, how do we judge merit?" asked Robbie McClintock, a learning technologies expert at Teachers College of Columbia University.

The push by some teachers for greater interactivity in the classroom also goes against the current emphasis on testing. Testing requires a known body of material, but interactive learning often involves students' seeking out topics on their own.

It's a conflict that's familiar to Michael Cunningham, a high school speech and debate teacher at Del Valle High School in Del Valle, Tex., outside Austin. Mr. Cunningham runs the Skype Foreign Language Lab, a program that allows students around the world to talk with one another via computers and headsets using the free VoIP phone service Skype.

He began the exchange in 2002 with three schools; this fall, the network will have 47 schools in seven countries. The program is interdisciplinary; last year, some Del Valle students were assigned phone pals in France, Italy and Turkey to practice foreign languages, while others participated in mock parliamentary debates. But Mr. Cunningham, himself a former principal, said that principals were rarely interested because the program's impact on standardized testing was difficult to gauge. His own principal, he said, was hesitant to allow some students to participate in a 24-school virtual debate last year with the National Urban Debate League because the scheduling conflicted with a practice test for the statewide assessment exam.

"I think the testing model is working against education," Mr. Cunningham said. "With Skype, you're opening up the whole world to the student, and that can't help but be good."

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